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ABSTRACT

The Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools Suspension Project has evolved into three distinct studies: (1) the Discipline Monitoring System (DMS); (2) the experience and behavior of students suspended multiple times in Junior and Senior High; and (3) school suspension rates. This paper reviews/summarizes the findings from the first two studies (the DMS and multiple suspendee studies), and discusses the results in terms of the improvement of minority students' achievement. The DMS--a computer-assisted model to allow individual schools to analyze their student discipline actions--makes it possible for school personnel to know characteristics of suspended students and patterns of student and staff behavior. No formal reports are made; data are for school use only. The study of multiple suspendees has shown many differences between students who are never suspended or suspended only once and multiple suspendees in extracurriculars, placement in special education, grades, and school attendance. Multiple suspendees can be categorized as: (1) truants; (2) episodic suspendees; (3) students in crisis; (4) low achievers; and (5) fighters. The suspension rates in Montgomery County have been greatly reduced, particularly for black students. The Suspension Project has been a major factor in this reduction. Two tables provide study results. (SLD)

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WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM THREE COMPLEMENTARY SUSPENSION STUDIES

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WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM THREE COMPLEMENTARY SUSPENSION STUDIES

Montgomery County Public Schools
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BACKGROUND

In the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) statistics on school suspension rates show that black and Hispanic students are suspended more often and lose more days of instruction because of suspension than do white and Asian students. Further, differences in suspension rates vary across schools, with some schools showing fairly comparable suspension rates for minority and majority students and others showing wide discrepancies. This is not a new occurrence. Reports on suspensions have for the last several years documented such an imbalance both in this school system and in many others (see Exhibit 1).

During the 1985-86 school year, the Superintendent of Schools initiated a number of activities aimed at reducing disciplinary incidences resulting in student suspensions. These included intensive monitoring of the monthly suspension statistics, a review of the literature on suspensions and on programs adopted elsewhere to reduce suspension rates, and a brief survey of current practices in MCPS high schools including suspension methods, staff training, and community and parent outreach programs. In addition, in March of 1986, the superintendent appointed an Ad Hoc Committee on Student Suspensions made up of community representatives and MCPS staff. The charge to this committee was to provide recommendations regarding critical

issues to be explored and ways in which these issues should be addressed.

After review of MCPS data and discussion of the literature, the Ad Hoc Committee recommended that MCPS take a comprehensive look at issues related to suspensions and, using a series of interrelated studies, seek ways of better preventing and handling discipline problems in our schools. Specifically, the committee recommended the implementation of a project called **THE MCPS SUSPENSION PROJECT** designed to address the following four areas of concern:

I. **The circumstances in which disciplinary actions occur.** Of particular interest are the specific events surrounding referrals for discipline and suspension incidents, including the type of infraction, the time of day, the location in or out of buildings, and the activity in which the student was involved.

II. **The elementary school experience and school histories of students suspended at the secondary school level.** Critical here are two related concerns: 1) Whether early indicators can be identified which predict later behavior problems, and 2) whether students evidencing problems in the early school years have received special supports intended to help them deal with these problems.

III. **The extent to which school practices and school climate differ in schools with different suspension statistics.** Central to this activity is developing an understanding of why suspension statistics vary from school to school and determining whether there are certain practices which have proven successful in some schools and might be helpful in others.

IV. **The effectiveness of innovative approaches to improving student behavior and reducing suspensions.** Building on the creativity of school-based staff and information acquired in the three activities described above, this activity looks at the extent to which new approaches, effective in reducing discipline problems, can be developed and implemented in schools.

The four areas described above form a comprehensive and coordinated project which looks at the past, present, and future. Further, the activities provide critically needed information of the three central components of the discipline-suspension process: persons, programs, and practices. Taken together, the four areas form a comprehensive look at factors affecting suspensions.

PURPOSE

To date, THE MCPS SUSPENSION PROJECT has evolved into three distinct studies or activities:

- The Discipline Monitoring System
- The Early Experiences and Behavior of Students Suspended in Junior and Senior High Schools
- Study on School Suspension Rates

For the past two years, MCPS has been managing these studies, all of which are aimed at reducing the number of minority students who are suspended from school. The purpose of this paper is to review and summarize the findings from two of the studies, and to relate the findings to the central theme of the symposium--Improving the Achievement of Minority Students.

FINDINGS

Study I: Discipline Monitoring System

The Discipline Monitoring System is a computer assisted model to allow individual secondary schools to perform a self-study analysis of their student discipline actions. The system is actually a set of prototype microcomputer programs which enable

the schools to perform self analyses of data which they already have, but which they cannot currently manipulate, to see trends and patterns. Such data include: who is suspended, who is referred, who makes the referral, characteristics of these persons, and events surrounding the discipline incident. Specifically, with the model it is possible for school personnel to pursue the following types of questions:

1. What are the characteristics of students who are suspended and those of students who are referred but not suspended? How do they differ?

2. Is there a consistent pattern of incidents which result in suspensions compared with those which don't?

3. Do student characteristics vary in relation to the number of days suspended for similar infractions or in relation to use of in-school vs. out-of-school suspensions for similar infractions?

4. What are the characteristics of staff who frequently refer students for suspension? Is there a relationship between job assignments, background characteristics and/or experiences which distinguish staff with high referral rates from those with low referral rates?

5. How does the location of incidents affect suspension events? To what extent do suspensions occur in classrooms vs. other areas of the schools? Are some locations or situations catalysts for conflict?

Specific Outcomes

No formal report will be written for this study. In fact, schools agreed only to participate in this activity with the understanding that data generated by the monitoring system would be used only by school staff. Reports that are generated by the system remain in the school building and are used only by school building staff. The following observation, however,

is worth noting:

- Administrators are discussing the findings with their staffs and are using the results to make improvements in suspension practices. Administrators are using the system to generate useful reports such as the creation of student and teacher profiles that appear to be associated with a disproportionate number of suspensions and other disciplinary incidents. Student profiles are also being used in parent and staff conferences as well as student conferences with administrators. In the latter situation, staff are extremely excited about the fact that they are able to discuss and document a student's discipline history with objective information.

- Proper utilization of the system suffers greatly without school-based clerical support. The system is paper driven, and many administrators have refused to operate the system without additional clerical supports. This problem, however, may be solved in the future as the school system's office of computer operations becomes more involved with supporting the system at the school level.

Study II: Study of Multiple Suspendees

Of all THE SUSPENSION PROJECT activities, to date, this study has proven to be the most valuable. This year long study of students suspended numerous times reveals a number of significant findings that help us better understand why students misbehave in MCPS secondary schools.

Specific Outcomes

- Overall, students who get suspended numerous times differ noticably from students who either don't get suspended or who get suspended one-time. Some of the areas of difference are participation in extracurricular activities, placement in special education programs, course grades, and school attendance. In all of these areas, as well as others, nonsuspendees and students suspended one-time out participate and out perform multiple suspendees.

- The study's analysis of multiple suspendees has shown that all multiple suspendees are not alike. Distinct suspendee types exist; differing racially in make-up. Using the

education literature, school histories of multiple suspendees, and supporting information from suspendees, parents, and school staff five suspendee types emerged:

1. **Truant suspendees,** students with serious attendance or truancy problems. Truants make up 27 percent of the multiple suspendee sample (total sample = 219 students). Racially this type tends to be more white than black.

2. **Episodic suspendees,** students whose school records show no unusual problems--no truancy, no class cutting, no learning problems. Episodic suspendees make up 22 percent of the multiple suspendee sample. Racially this type tends to be more Asian and white than black.

3. **Student-in-crisis suspendees,** students unable to adjust to a short or long term crisis (e.g., family crisis-divorce or an abusive parent, a traumatic move experienced by an ESOL student new to the USA or personal problem such as drug addiction). Students-in-crisis make up 22 percent of the multiple suspendee sample. Racially this type tends to be more white than black.

4. **Low-achiever suspendees,** students with a history of academic learning problems. Many of the these suspendees have been placed in a special education program for a specific learning disability. Low-achievers make up 16 percent of the multiple suspendee sample. Racially this type tends to more black than white.

5. **Fighter suspendees,** students with a long history of suspensions, most for fighting and other aggressive actions. Fighters make up 13 percent of the multiple suspendee sample. Racially this type tends to more black than white.

The five suspendee types differ noticably from one another (see Exhibit 2). Some of the areas of difference are the nature and number of suspensions, participation in special MCPS programs, family mobility, and course grades. Many of these differences help explain the behavior of the five suspendee types. For example, the fact that truants were extremely mobile students during their elementary school years helps explain to some extent why it was possible for these suspendees to develop into chronic truants in spite of the fact that the vast majority of the truants spent most of their elementary years in MCPS.

- Analysis shows that in terms of improving suspendee behavior, MCPS has responded differently to correcting the misbehaving of the five suspendee types. Schools have been very responsive to correcting the behavior of students-in-crisis; however, to some extent less attention has been paid to correcting the misbehaving of low-achievers, truants and fighters. For instance, take the case of students-in-crisis, school records show that for these suspendees MCPS has done the most in terms of responding to their discipline problems. A little more than 70 percent of these suspendees have received help from their school. Overall, about half of the other multiple suspendees have had action taken on their behalf to correct misbehaving.

DISCUSSION

Over the last several school years MCPS has made great strides in reducing the use of suspensions for disciplining students in its secondary schools. For the first time since suspension numbers were reported publicly the suspension rate for black students at the senior high school level fell below 10 percent. Reducing the use of suspensions has not been easy. It occurred because MCPS identified this issue as a priority, and directed specific efforts and resources at reducing the use of suspensions. Clearly THE MCPS SUSPENSION PROJECT has had a major impact on helping reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions for black students as well as other students.

In spite of the progress of the past several years, much still remains to be done. The suspension rates of black male students could still be lower. Bringing about further changes, however, will require a great deal more hardwork. Fortunately,

the results from THE MCPS SUSPENSION PROJECT point to some of the places where MCPS can begin this work. The results also make it clear that where we begin many times goes beyond the simple approach or solution that is based on the notion that suspension and misbehaving is a problem that is solely related to belonging to a certain race or ethnic group.

The five suspendee types demonstrate that students misbehave for different reasons. In addition, they highlight how critical it is for us to look at these reasons and understand them if we expect to improve the behavior of not just multiple suspendees but any student who misbehaves in school. Finally, the findings make it clear that not every effort used by schools to correct the misbehaving of suspendees will work. Schools must match solutions and corrective actions carefully if they expect to improve the behavior of students. Programs to improve behavior or to improve achievement have to be structured around more than just the "race" of the student. Programs have to be structured around an understanding of how students behave or why they misbehave. For example, a program that has met with modest success in MCPS is "mentoring". It doesn't take a lot to figure out why this program works. It works because it demonstrates to students that the school cares. According to many "fighters" this is one place where schools have failed them.

Another interesting finding from the study of multiple suspendee is the fact that the suspendee types who received the

least amount of help from the schools are types that are disproportionally made up of black students. It would appear as though black students' misbehaving goes unchecked longer than the misbehaving of other students. To some degree, this may explain the disproportionate suspension rates for black students. And further, this finding suggests that racial bias may play a role in the discipline process.

Responding to the bias, however, has to go beyond simply saying the bias exists. THE MCPS SUSPENSION PROJECT has demonstated time and time again through different activities that school staff are extremely defensive when it is suggested (or even shows to be true through data) that bias exists. But we should want our discussion of how to improve the discipline process to go beyond the "finger pointing stage." Such efforts are not productive and in many situations may prove to be counterproductive. Therefore, if we want school staff to treat students fairly we have to be able to offer them constructive solutions and strategies for changing behavior, and the findings from THE MCPS SUSPENSION PROJECT tell us that these solutions and strategies have to be built around more than just the "race" of the student. Successful strategies must be built around an understanding of how and why students misbehave. MCPS is moving in this direction, and some recent efforts to help students-in-crisis seem to reflect this new direction. One of the most successful strategies currently being used for students-

in-crisis is the use of peer counselors. These counselors are being used to prevent serious problems from developing, and to alter misbehaving prior to its development into a serious discipline problem. Similar efforts should be tried out with "fighters."

EXHIBIT 1
Percentage of Students Suspended From Their Current School at Least Once by Race, and by School Location and School Level

Location and Level	American Indians	Asians	Hispanics	Blacks	Whites
Urban Jr. High School	17	14	14	23	8
Urban Sr. High School	15	7	17	21	10
Suburban Jr. High School	8	11	12	19	7
Suburban Sr. High School	23	11	17	22	11
Rural Jr. High School	5	6	9	15	5
Rural Sr. High School	14	10	8	19	8
MCPS Jr. High School	19	2	7	13	5
MCPS Sr. High School	9	3	7	16	6

Data taken from Wu, Shi-Chang, The Foundations of Student Suspension. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education (1980), 2-8.

EXHIBIT 2

Background Characteristics For Five Suspendee Types

	SUSPENDEE TYPE					
	Truant	Episodic/ Transient	Student in Crisis	Low Achiever	Fighter	All Multiple Suspendees
Number	58	49	49	34	29	219
Mean Number of Suspensions	4.02	1.53*	5.73*	3.00	7.86*	4.20
% Suspended for Fighting	30%	39%	34%	31%	35%	34%
% Suspended for Insubordination	47*	39	39	42	45	42
% Suspended for Verbal Abuse	5	12*	7	13*	8	9
% Suspended for Attendance Problems .	7	4	8	3*	5	6
% Suspended for Drug/Alcohol Abuse ..	8*	2	7	3	2	5
% Suspended for Other Behavior Probs.	3	4	5	10*	7	5
% in Headstart	22	10*	10*	24	28*	18
% in Chapter One	16	7	0*	28*	15	12
% ESOL	12	26*	18	21	4*	16
% in Special Education	16	0*	16	48*	15	17
% in Extracurriculars	48	74*	51	68	41*	57
% Attending MCPS 7+ Years	78	65	53*	88	74	71
% From Single Parent Home	60	44	58	45	44	52
% Residing at 4+ Addresses	23	9*	18	3*	28	17
% Minority	60	74	59	77	62	66
% Black	38	25*	33	44	48	36
% Male	62	59	78	77	69	68
% Losing Credit	48*	10*	22	18	31	27
% Repeating a Grade	58	12*	31*	52	56	41
Mean Days Absent (Per School Year) ..	21*	8*	15	9*	15	14
Mean Days Absent	203*	63*	100	82*	138	124
Age	18*	17	16	16	16	17
Income (In Thousands)	$32	$35	$34	$33	$36	$34
CAT Total Grd. 3 (NCE)	47	62*	57	34*	48	48
CAT Total Grd. 5 (NCE)	48	62*	55	38*	49	52
Md Functional Reading (% Passing) ...	74	92*	65	62	76	74
Md Functional Math (% Passing)	37	75*	48	27*	41	47
Md Functional Writing (% Passing) ...	47	77*	40	29*	48	49
Md Functional Citizenship (% Passing)	28	42	24	21*	17*	28
Grade Point Average	1.21	2.13*	1.46	1.49	1.05*	1.49

* Suspendee type differs statistically from other suspendee types. The percentage reported is either significantly more or less than what should normally be expected, or the number reported is significantly lower or higher than the mean for all multiple suspendees.